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From the cupboard to the boardroom and back

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Place-based Arts

Abstract title

From the cupboard to the boardroom and back: 100 plaster objects

Stuart Bennett

Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), University of Edinburgh

In 2013 the Dutch artist Krijn de Koning was invited to undertake a residency at Edinburgh College of Art. This resulted in an Edinburgh Art Festival co-commission, 'Land', in the Sculpture Court at ECA, his first work in the UK.

During the fellowship Krijn and I worked with a group of students on a project centred around 100 small plaster objects that were donated by the estate of Eduardo Paolozzi to the School of Informatics at the University of Edinburgh in 2007. These models and casts were stored in cardboard boxes in a cupboard next to the Turing Room. In that room we unpacked the boxes and catalogued the objects in sketchbooks and photographs. The intention was to make the works public but what was more intriguing were our discussions about the different senses of history and value we ascribed to the collection.

Keywords

Sculpture, location specific, objects, situation, casts, plaster, site, material culture.

Short bio

Stuart Bennett is an artist whose work is underpinned by an interest in making processes, materials and contexts. Recent exhibitions have focused on pared back and primitive technologies for drawing 'accuracy': wooden templates, a brass polygraph, plumb lines. These works explore approaches to preciseness and use the fabric of the exhibition space as surface. The slight interventions draw attention to the place where they are made and installed. He is interested in drawing attention to the sensorial and material experience of a place. Recent writing has been concerned with elucidating the ontological process of making. Perhaps artists make things so they don't need to be present but as artist

teachers we do need to be able to provide a way of telling that can be grasped.

Stuart has developed location specific projects in the UK, Germany, Estonia, Switzerland, Sweden and North America. From 2009 – 2014 he was Head of the School of Art at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. In 2014 he was appointed Deputy Principal of Edinburgh of Art.

s.bennett@ed.ac.uk

Edinburgh College of Art, Lauriston Place, Edinburgh, EH3 9DF

Article

From the cupboard to the boardroom and back: 100 plaster objects

'Let us suppose that the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world. By this view the universe of man-made things simply coincides with the history of art. It then becomes an urgent requirement to devise better ways of considering everything men have made. This we may achieve sooner by proceeding from art rather than from use, for if we depart from use alone, all useless things are overlooked, but if we take the desirableness of things as our point of departure, then useful objects are properly seen as things we value more or less dearly'.

(Kubler, G. 1962: p.1)

During his time as the John Florent Stone Fellow Krijn de Koning was intrigued by the figurative cast collection situated around the college corridors. His proposal for the Edinburgh Art Festival and Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) co-commission, 'Land', was to gather the casts in the sculpture court and make the familiar unfamiliar simply by raising us on wooden platforms to different viewpoints of perspective. The casts are ordinary to staff and students. They have been wheeled

around for decades hinting at the academic history of copying from the poor relations of sculpture collections.

The commissioned work was about organizing physical reality, in order to expose beauty, or even just to change or emphasize something that would have been unclear without that action.

It was about intention. Why do you do it? What is it about? Who are you? What is this world? Complex and difficult questions but art means little without such consciousness. The intention was to make an artwork as a place, to give a use to it, so people could walk on it or use it for a discussion or a debate, to alert us to the accustomed and engage with it differently. During the preparation for this we worked with students and discussed the value of objects, the purpose of collections and of place and their currency for learning. We wanted to understand a sense of material culture from the perspective of a digital generation.

The University of Edinburgh announced, in 2007, a major bequest from the estate of sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi, who died in April 2005. This includes a set of Paolozzi's Turing prints, together with four sculptures in chrome and bronze, and one hundred plaster maquettes by the world-renowned Scottish artist.

These works will be housed in the Informatics Forum, the new home for the University's School of Informatics, currently under construction in Edinburgh. The Forum, an 11,500 metre building on Crichton Street in the centre of Edinburgh's Southside, will open in 2008. It will house some 500 researchers and also InSpace, an accessible space dedicated to public understanding and exploration of the cultural significance of informatics.

Professor Michael Fourman, Head of the School of Informatics, said the School was delighted to receive the bequest.

'Paolozzi was intrigued by genius and creativity. His heroes, Leonardo, Einstein, Wittgenstein, Freud, and Turing sought to explore the inner workings of the mind, the body and the world. He was fascinated by the relationship between the organic and the artificial, the representational and the abstract; the relationship between man and machine. These themes are central to our research, and these artworks will be used to help visitors engage with science of informatics. At a practical level, Paolozzi's work explores themes of modularity and seriality, or repetition. Again these are ideas we study in the context of computation, and we hope that the art will lead visitors to discussion and exploration of the science'.

(Fourman, M. 2007)

As a recently merged addition to the University of Edinburgh the College of Art had been asked to consider how we might respond to and exhibit the collection. We thought this opportunity could complement the large-scale work planned for the sculpture court and engage the students in a paradoxical situation; as practice-based makers how would they deal with the assumption that they could or should respond and exhibit a collection of Paolozzi's plaster casts?

In 2013, six years later after the bequest, these delicate objects were stored in cardboard file boxes, next to boxes of tea, in a cupboard adjacent to the Turing Room, a boardroom on the top floor of the Informatics Building. Paolozzi sculptures and prints decorated the walls and through the windows the city of Edinburgh unfolded towards the Pentland Hills. Working alongside the students we were thinking of a forward way of understanding the creative process rather than working back from the objects, to undergo a process about an experience rather than the suggested request of an exposition of the plaster casts, to find a correspondence between us, the casts and our physical engagement with them.

'The aim is to depict the place as some sort of historical palimpsest and/or the corollary of this, an exposition of a state of mind.'

(Keiller 2013: 26)

The condition of the work was fragile. As we unwrapped the objects they changed. Some fragments from the precise and sensitive plaster casts were adrift in the bubble-wrap, the cataloguing made no sense, they were vulnerable and valuable, hidden and exposed, random but redolent of recognizable works. We discussed what we were doing, how unlikely it was to have this opportunity to directly make contact with these objects, why we were being asked to find a way to display them. The value of the objects was intriguing, we knew they had worth but not what that meant, but the value we ascribed was the place they were stored, the brown, generic file boxes, the time they had been sequestered in a cupboard and the awkward and amusing quandary that we knew we probably shouldn't be doing what professors of informatics had asked us to do. Our knowledge shared, a sense of place and time acknowledged. Drawings were made and responses annotated, similarities made between the boardroom hardware

and some of the plaster objects, the orientation of the building and the city, the cleanliness of data processing for storage and retrieval, information science, informatics and the unkempt nature of objects. There was an unspoken awareness that our learning was not about the casts or the place but was implicit in the experience of our correspondence with them and each other.

A tacit understanding of the work combined with a sensory awareness of the place and time. This was a haptic engagement and we found a variety of ways of retelling our material knowledge while recognizing and foregrounding our diverse responses. A relationship established between this encounter and the scale of the work planned for the sculpture court with the cast collection. The intention was to make the Paolozzi works public but what was more intriguing were the odd, disparate, intricate forms, the curious way they had been wrapped and stored, and our discussions about the different senses of history and value we ascribed to the collection. For us, the place they inhabited was compelling and exhibiting them seemed disingenuous and trite. Their value to us was our values shared. We wrapped the objects back up and returned them to their cardboard boxes in the cupboard.

The statement is pointless

The finger is speechless

(Laing, R.D. 1970: 90)

The objects are now conserved by the University of Edinburgh Centre for Research Collections and have been exhibited in brightly lit glass cabinets. The students involved have graduated. Months later many of them spoke to me about the project. They were unambiguous about the influence it had on them collectively and individually but they couldn't articulate how, or in what way, it had affected their work. The confluence of materials and consciousness empowered an irreducible flow of correspondence. Wisdom from the knowledge of experience not lost in or to information.

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